

GETTING BACK TO BASICS

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This title has an attractive but delusive ring to it. “Getting back” seems to imply some idyllic past when all was well, when these “basics” were in force. Then one must ask what these “basics” are, whose observation constituted this glowing golden age? When was it? Did it ever exist? What was its substance or content? What to go for, to drop?

Was the golden age the age of Bishop Lowth, of the 18th Century, one of our prominent early pundits whose edict ran, among other things, to the split infinitive of evil memory, that shibboleth (or is it sibboleth, one does not want to be among the slain 44,000 of the Amalekites) that has been one of the favourites of purists ever since? It was based on the entirely false premise that, because the infinitive in Latin is one word, the infinitive in English should not separate the *to* from the following verb. Such so-called rules have nothing to do with either purism or basics and only wait for someone to boldly go and break them. If one goes to Fowler’s *The King’s English* of 1906, product of that famous pair of Victorian schoolmasters, expecting to find support for the split infinitive, one finds instead sweet reason: split or not, as seems best. What is, or is not, the King’s English, or Queen’s English, or standard English, with a small *s*, is something that will have to be considered.

But to continue to find our lost golden age to go back to, that age of basics, should we try the late 19th Century and Churchill’s Harrow, the school where he was famously taught English by an inspired master instead of the classics, because he was one of the less intelligent boys? The passage is well known, perhaps notorious, but is still worth repeating.

I continued in this unpretentious situation for nearly a year. However, by being so long in the lowest form I

gained an immense advantage over the cleverer boys. They all went on to learn Latin and Greek and splendid things like that, but I was taught English. We were considered such dunces that we could learn only English. Mr Somervell – a most delightful man, to whom my debt is great – was charged with the duty of teaching the stupidest boys the most disregarded thing – namely, to write mere English. He knew how to do it. He taught it as no one else has ever taught it. Not only did we learn English parsing thoroughly, but we also practised continually English analysis. Mr Somervell had a system of his own. He took a long sentence and broke it up into its components by means of black, red, blue, and green inks. Subject, verb, object: Relative Clauses, Conditional Clauses, Conjunctive and Disjunctive Clauses! Each had its colour and its bracket. It was a kind of drill. We did it almost daily. As I remained in the Third Fourth (β) three times as long as anyone else, I had three times as much of it. I learned it thoroughly. Thus, I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence – which is a noble thing. And when in after years my schoolfellows who had won prizes and distinction for writing such beautiful Latin poetry and pithy Greek epigrams had to come down again to common English, to earn their living or make their way, I did not feel myself at any disadvantage. Naturally I am biased in favour of boys learning English. I would make them all learn English: and then I would let the clever ones learn Latin as an honour, and Greek as a treat. But the only thing I would whip them for is not knowing English. I would whip them hard for that.

My Early Life – Winston Churchill.

Is this totally arcane cruelty to dumb animals, or is there not something of relevance? Are our children not, in fact, as capable as these boys condemned to learn English because not clever enough to do Latin or Greek? Without quite going as far as disjunctive and conjunctive clauses, is teaching the basics of sentence structure and even an appreciation of style something that is beyond the grasp of South African youth?

Take a tree, it has a trunk with branches, smaller branches, twigs. The trunk is the main sentence. The branches are clauses joined by conjunctions or relative pronouns to the trunk, the main sentence, or sometimes joined to other branches. (Note 1) In each unit there is a subject (noun or pronoun or something functioning as such) and a finite verb (not a participle). In other words, one needs some elementary parsing as well – what is a noun, what is a verb, what is a conjunction, above all, what makes a finite verb or a participle? And one can have a compound sentence rather than a complex sentence, two or more main sentences joined by co-ordinating conjunctions like *and* or *but* (which can join lesser parts of a sentence, too).

Churchill's schoolmaster taught him to break up a sentence by underlining the different parts with pencils of a different colour. It sounds a useful idea. If you can analyse a sentence, you can read. Grammar and what are called "reading skills" go hand in hand. We are apparently a nation of notably low reading capacity for our age. We are also a nation for whom formal grammar was long ago abolished for reasons of widespread fashion. Perhaps sentence structure can begin to make sense once more, can be a golden basic, glowing faintly in the Victorian past that could also light our future. We would, however, only be developing a syntactic ability that is natural in very small children, part of mankind's inherent linguistic capacity – Chomsky's black box. Little kiddies can do clauses.

We should naturally remember that we are dealing with the written language, not the spoken, although there is no reason the spoken

cannot, when appropriate, be coherent and well-shaped. The aim of both is to communicate effectively. Let us, however, finally scotch the notion that was widely current, and probably still is, that all one must do is to communicate, whatever the medium. We are teachers, with something to teach. That kind of communication does not need a teacher nor a school nor the taxpayer's money. Communicative language teaching does not mean disregarding language teaching; does not mean disregarding grammar. Those who think so should go and look at Leech and Svartvik's *Communicative Grammar of English*.

Let us also get rid of the silly notion that seems to be well entrenched over the generations that one cannot start a sentence with *because*. Because teachers have fallen back on this little rule of thumb, because they did not know that one could put a subordinate adverbial clause first, and because they wanted to prevent such clauses without main sentences, that is to say as sentence fragments, they concocted an easy lie, rather than explain some simple sentence structure, so perpetrating a classroom myth. That was a periodic sentence, of sorts!

It is said that when deviation from standard grammar becomes ineradicable and when teachers either cease to notice or do not even see, or know, then a new English is on the way, perhaps even a pidgin or creole. The situation needs contemplation for those wanting to get back to basics. There was once an academic colleague, an enthusiastic trumpeter of things new, at Port Elizabeth, who realized that very many of her students both wrote and said, "should of", rather than "should have", which is, incidentally, standard Cockney if not standard English.

The reduced schwa in "should've" in the spoken form has been taken for something else when the language is mainly spoken and little written. It may even be a venerable survival from 1820 Settlers, who brought very varied English to our shores. My colleague gladly wanted to accept the form written and spoken, in her students, as a har-

binger of a new South African English. Consider the long-term consequences for the students' grasp of the tense system if the auxiliary verb "has" were replaced by "of", and the effect on their written comprehension when the rest of the educated world ignorantly continued to write "have" in the millions of books and newspapers world-wide. Consider the unfortunate impression the students' own writing might have when exposed to a wider world. However much it might rile one's postcolonial sensibilities, this thing, standard English, exists and has its most important uses. *The Singapore Times*, *The Tokyo Times*, *The New York Times*, *The London Times*, and even *The Scotsman*, are remarkably similar with, obviously, here and there, the odd expression of a local nature.

Things are, indeed, not at all easy, locally. Take the matter of stative verbs: "I am having a problem"; "I am wanting help". There are many more of these stative verbs. They should not, except in some exceptional situations, be used in the continuous, but this use is ingrained, especially in African usage. Quirk *et, al*, in their *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, not an easy book to use but our great modern standby, says that the stative verbs are still an established part of usage. Quirk's book is a *corpus* grammar, not prescriptive, compiled from millions of examples gathered from speech and text, but it is centred on reasonably educated use in England. If this problem of stative use could be got right in schools, it would save much patient correction at university. Likewise with the difference between the Simple Present and the Continuous Present, very prevalent in Afrikaans speakers but general, too. Necessary for science. Water runs downhill, as a rule. It is running over the Vic Falls now.

Wicked old man Concord is likely to jump out of the bushes at us at any time. His tricky morphs are legion but let us at least get the idea of singular and plural across, and notch that third person singular Present Tense s. It is not space science. While we are about it, and dealing with *he*, *she*, and *it*, the personal pronouns, please to

remember that the African languages do not contain these gender distinctions, and that confusion of *he* and *she* is likely to remain ingrained unless dealt with early. If you have ever marked English III scripts, you will understand.

The Present Perfect Tense, the one with *have*, is in dire peril especially in snazzy advert lingo: “I just done it”. Why is it called the Present Perfect? “I have been doing this and have only just stopped”. Oppose that to: “I did it yesterday”. This is well worth a rescue operation. As is: “I had done it before you came”. Teach them all together; don’t drill them separately in senseless fashion. Totter backwards, and forwards on the stage as you do it, acting out deep past, past and near present.

What about tenses in the set work essay? If one writes on a text the controlling tense should be the Present, the Simple Present, not the Continuous, with possible incursions into the Present Perfect, and the Past only for historical facts outside the text, for odd occasions.

Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* in 1860. In this book he describes the boyhood and youth of a blacksmith’s apprentice. Pip, when small, meets an inaccessible little girl Estella. Later he is mysteriously left money and can become a young gentleman. Having lived a life of aspiration for Estella, he now thinks she is intended for him, only to learn the real source and to suffer severe disillusionment. As a very small boy he meets (had met) and helps (helped) a convict on the run. The convict becomes a wealthy man, but his money disqualifies Pip for Estella’s hand.

Reverting to syntax and moving to a more advanced level of syntax, one should tackle defining and non-defining clauses with the relative pronoun.

The man who was wearing a red shirt ran away.

The man, who was wearing a red shirt, ran away.

The first is defining, it picks out the man from other men. This is the clause in which “who” can be replaced by “that”, something that is a constant puzzle. The first implies the presence of others. If this were evidence in a court of law, the presence or absence of commas would be material. Generally, the use of the comma, and most especially the full-stop, merit much attention in the brave new age of basics.

To conclude, a brief word about the King’s English, the Queen’s English, standard English (with a small s), South African English, Black or African English, and English English. Let’s take the last first: there is no such thing. English in Britain is as varied, or more so, as anywhere else in the world, and they are all, in their way, equally correct. The King’s English is not a super-correct, super-refined variety. Thomas Wilson, rhetorician and grammarian, writing around 1550, composed a humorous mock letter complaining of all the terrible changes taking place in English. Mothers could no longer understand their sons. The letter was a plea for plain, ordinary, the Kings English, understood by all.

The once well-known handbook, *The King’s English* of 1906, with an updated version by Eric Partridge, is still worth picking up if you can find it. It was by the redoubtable Fowler brothers, those two Victorian schoolmasters, one of whom died of pneumonia in a tent in France in the Great War while the other, at sixty, was agitating to be sent to fight rather than peel potatoes. If you consult them on the infamous split infinitive you will find them not prescriptive but eminently sensible. You will find them elsewhere discussing the error the “Fused Participle”. Here, you might think, is true Victorian grammar. Back to basics at last! I had to teach the “fused participle” in a practical English class to prospective lawyers at the University of Pretoria about sixty years ago! My performing this was shamefully unsuccessful. There you have the avoidance of the fused participle. The theory behind it is complicated. “Performing” is a gerund, not a

participle, hence a possessive is required. Whoever does this today, you ask? Look in Quirk's *Comprehensive*, and you will find that there is still sometimes sense in it.

The Queen's English is a matter of pronunciation. If one compares Her Majesty at 26 with now, you will find that the crystal glass has slightly lost its roundness. If you listen to the B.B.C. today, you will find that the times of what used to be called Received Pronunciation have vanished. Standard English is much less a matter of pronunciation than of a pretty uniform, educated, written form that is world-wide and very useful, in fact, essential: the one we should try to teach. South African English is multiple; the English-speaking variety is now, itself, extremely varied. Indian and African are distinct, but many Africans, depending on the school, sound better than many white English-speakers, although still with distinctive South African features of a modest kind. Afrikaans is distinctive; but the whole field is blurring. We talk here of accent. The cement is the written. There is a varied local word-hoard, but the vast bulk of what we use is universal, in structure and syntax and vocabulary.

Note 1. I have here distinguished between main sentence and subordinate clause. Academic grammars will tend to use the term "clause" more comprehensively. For teaching purposes, the distinction I make is useful, and it fits the analogy.

Churchill, Winston. *My Early Life*.

Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Longman, 1985.

Leech and Svartvik. *A Communicative Grammar of English*, Longman, 1975.